

# A Veil (*hijab*) as a Public Symbol of a Muslim Woman Modern Identity

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## ABSTRACT

*In this article the author explains the social role of Muslim woman in a postmodern society through a public symbol of her identity – the veil. The article's thesis is that the Muslim women's manifestation of their Islamic denomination through veiling and wearing appropriate clothes (in the case of men through growing beards and wearing clothes considered appropriate for them) signifies an expression of a new, Islamic shaped identity. This is a postmodern identity based on modernity rather than a fundamental reaction to modernity. The veil, a public symbol of Muslim identity, is often given a different meaning by its observers than the person actually wearing it. Therefore, the intention of this article is to analyze the elements of a particular, postmodern identity that a Muslim woman's veil, as a public symbol, represents.*

**Key words:** Islam, woman, feminism, tradition, identity

## Introduction

El-Din al Hilali, the chief mufti of Australia, became the object of public criticism when he said that *women that go uncovered are much like exposed meat that attracts sexual predators*. The statement brought down on him women's fury throughout Australia and it resulted in calls for resignation of the leading Australian Muslim cleric. Has the mufti, as the official representative of the Australian Muslim community, slipped his tongue or has he expressed the opinion of the Muslim majority? Is this a misunderstanding or deeply rooted difference that makes Muslims different from the rest of the citizens of today's global world? Do these differences make Muslims incapable of participating in this modern world or do we just not understand what message the Muslims want to send to the world, even through the Australian mufti?

It is about covering women. This case has reminded us of the discussion in European, American and Muslim public about the right or prohibition of wearing the veil as a religious symbol. Where are the borders between freedom, morality and institutional coercion?

The veil, as a demarcation line between the opposing sides, is the core of disagreement between socially acceptable behavior and socially unacceptable behavior, between our perception of what is advanced and what is backward.

Veil (*hijab*) is a cover for head. It is women's equivalent to men's hat, by which women cover themselves, their hair, face and neck. In a modern society, covering the head is usually a custom related to civil servants (soldiers, police officers, nurses, nuns) traditional society, rural background, lower education and older age. In a modern society, the veil, as a symbol of distinction, worn with big sunglasses, was promoted by grand movie stars like Grace Kelly and Sophia Loren. Yet, in the same modern society, the veil is still perceived as a symbol that implies something old, traditional, historical, religious, rural, and backward.

Therefore, it is undoubtedly surprising to see how young women voluntarily accept the veil as a symbol of particular identity in modern societies like those of USA and EU. It is rather confusing when young, urban and highly educated Muslim women wear such a thing. It becomes even more confusing when we realize that these women were in fact born and educated in those countries, speak the language, participate in local culture and have the citizenship. In the eyes of a contemporary western observer such a status is considered to be higher than these Muslim women would have in their own Muslim societies. From his perspective, wearing a veil symbolizes a position of women, which is associated with terms like backward, closed, oppressed, hindered, etc.

However, from the point of view of women who wear it, the veil has transformed itself from a symbol of social oppression into a public symbol of distinguished social identity and a symbol of freedom to choose this very identity. In non-Muslim societies of Western Europe and the USA, the veil is perceived as a publicly insulting just like Gay pride or Mohawk hairstyle. Muslim women by simple act of wearing the veil have transformed it from a sign of backwardness into a symbol of pluralism of identity, which demands to be recognized as equal in the modern pluralistic society.

The Veil as a symbol of Muslim women's social role is often used as an argument in attempts to prove the backwardness of Muslim societies and Islam as a whole, and as a proof of failure of their modernization. This thesis is not appropriate. Namely, today all societies are modern. The modern frame of societal community is materialized through nation-state and in the relation toward her. Therefore, the explanation of the women's social role, and of Muslim women's too, should be looked for within the framework of nation-state and not within a dogma of a universal religion, such as Islam.

Prior to that, it is necessary to distinguish between societies in which a form of Islamism is the basis for a governing ideology (Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Sudan) and societies in which the Muslims are just a religious minority of an ethnic origin different from the domicile one (EU, USA, Australia) or groups entirely excluded from the political sphere. There is also the third type of societies in which Muslims form a majority of the population but a ruling establishment is against religion.

This article is focused on West European and American societies in which the Muslims are immigrants and just a religious minority of various ethnic origins. In these societies the veil worn by Muslim women is perceived in this article as a form of public expression of different kind of modern identity, protest and message. In these immigrant communities the veil, as a head cover, was worn by the first generation and only during religious ceremonies of the community that were taking part in the private sphere. In the public sphere the Muslims followed a dress code proscribed by the domicile society. It was not until political Islam emerged as social agency of modernization that the immigrant Muslim population became more self aware and more ready to cross from the private sphere into the public one. This article explains the consequences of this »coming of the closet«.

## The Veil in the Islamic Tradition

When did the veil enter the Islamic tradition? The veil had first been worn by women from the Prophet Muhammad's household, in order to prevent potential rumors

about their relationships outside the household. It is the strong egalitarian Islamic culture that inspired other Muslim women outside the household to start wearing the veil. When Christian women who lived near Muslim population saw how much respect Muslim women enjoyed in their community, they also started to follow the trend.

Islam is unique in Abraham's religions because it pays a lot of attention in its basic religious texts to women and man-woman affairs. How does Qur'an define the relationship between men and women?

*Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made some of them to excel others and because they spend out of their property; the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded; and (as to) those on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping-places and beat them; then if they obey you, do not seek a way against them; surely Allah is High, Great.<sup>1</sup>*

Aside from the above-mentioned *sura* (chapter) *An-Nisa* (woman), Qur'an speaks about the woman and the relationship between a man and a woman in many places and also about the ways it is regulated. These issues also appear in *Hadith* (sayings) of Muhammad, which is the second fundamental text of the *sharia* law\*.

In the Islamic interpretation of the world the sexes are not equal. They are rather complementary. Qur'an emphasizes the economic base of a man's social role. In return, a woman is obliged to sustain the morality, family and property which Qur'an emphasizes the reproductive and moral base of woman's social role. The Qur'anic revelation changed the perception of the woman's social role. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century Qur'an granted women the right to own property and to divorce. Given the time of appearance, these Qur'anic provisions were revolutionary. Egalitarianism, typical of Islam, has also found its expression in the issues of women's rights and in the time of its creation it has provided women a high degree of equality with men.

Modern interpretations of men-women relationships in Islam have a tendency to explain the Qur'an's precedence of man over woman as a confirmation of men's aspiration for dominancy and exploitation of women. At the same time, these interpretations fail to analyze the man's social role at the time and the reasons why he has been granted such a position in society. The man's social role contains some rights but also some responsibilities. What distinguishes a child from an adult are the duties and the responsibilities that each of them has in their society and a broader social surrounding.

The traditional pattern of man-woman relationship, created in the traditional patriarchal societies of the Mid-

\* The foundation of *sharia* law, as the holy Muslim law, is made of Qur'an as the revelation of God's word and of *Hadith* and *Sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad. *Hadith* is collection of Muhammad's sayings and *Sunna* contains the description of Muhammad's deeds, conduct and behavior.

dle East including the subordination of women and the reduction of their existence to the private sphere only, became islamised with time.

In their fight for women's rights, Islamic feminists emphasize that this pattern of behavior is not originally Islamic, so they call for return to the authentic Islam of the Prophet Muhammad and his *rashiduna* (rightful caliphs). The feminists say that the Prophet's wife Aisha had participated in battles with men as well as in *diwan* (council) that used to discuss the most important issues concerning the survival of *umma* (Muslim community). Therefore, from the Islamic perspective, the women are not demanding some new right but rather the renewal of the rights that they have already had. In that way the golden age of Islam becomes their golden age too. By accepting the modern Islamic identity, the Muslim women use it as a toll for advancement of their demands for equality.

Traditional society, including the Muslim one, looks at a woman's social role within the traditional framework of a man-woman relationship. Throughout a woman's life, her social role can be divided in a couple of stages: child, girl, woman (mother), old woman (grandmother). The first stage is pre-reproductive and the last stage is post-reproductive. By entering the reproductive age a woman gains a higher social value, which is confirmed by her motherhood. The ability of giving birth guarantees the reproduction of the community. The age of reproduction is also the age of sexuality of both woman and man. Islam is aware of human sexuality and imperfection, so the ways of conducting social as well as sexual relationships are proscribed. In the Islamic dogma, life and deeds of Muhammad serve as a model according to which the Muslims should behave and organize their lives. Along side that, there are many roles that determine the social behavior of Muslims. The Muslims are aware of their inability to reach their Prophet's level of faith so they try to imitate him in their behavior and conduct. The life of Muslims is regulated by a whole set of rules and advices. The set encompasses prayer, diet, housing, personal and public hygiene, dress code, and system of social relations within and outside the community. Therefore, it is understandable why many people call Islam a way of life.

Sexuality is also regulated in the web of social relationships. Its regulation is often confusing for a non-Muslim observer since it allows polygamy\*\*. From the observer's point of view the polygamy is heaven for men and it is a source of fantasies and numerous prejudices that the Westerners have had about Muslims throughout history. In reality, around 99% of Muslim families are monogamous. Polygamy occurs as rare as in Western societies and it exclusively depends on the man's economic

ability to sustain many wives. The Qur'an permits polygamy but it also regulates it extensively.

Islam, as community religion, propagates marriage. Aware of human limitations, Islam propagates marriage and family as institutions and advocates marriage of young people. In the background of that there are two kinds of concerns: biological and social stability. Orthodox Islamic texts believe that it is necessary for young people to marry so they could consume sex within the framework of marriage. Islam is permissive of human sexuality but it proscribes the harshest punishment for adultery and sex consumed outside the marriage. The reason for drastic punishment of adultery is instability that such an act causes to the whole community; therefore such acts should be suppressed by the harshest measures.

According to Western scale of measurement, Islam is highly sexual but this is primarily an impression of a Western observer. It should be more appropriate to analyze the cause of the modern Western sexual frustration then to shift the responsibility to Islam. Emphasizing the sexuality of a certain society or a system of beliefs has an additional function. It is for the observer to emphasize the backwardness and inferiority of the observed. This is evident in prejudices about Afro-Americans in which the movements for the white purity use euphemisms like: *they mate like animals*. A distance from corporality is considered to be a sign of racial superiority. If people are controlled by animalistic instincts, and that is usually ascribed to blacks and Muslims, then their position on the cultural scale is lower.

This is different from the traditional Islamic understanding of man. Islam is aware of a man's imperfection and sinfulness but also of his position towards God in respect to other God's creatures. Man is God's emissary on Earth. However, what God empowered him with has not been given to him to destroy but rather to preserve it for God, the only master of the world.

Balance and moderateness represent the foundation of Islamic understanding of life, which is also reflected in a dress code. A man's temperament and violent nature are familiar to Islam. Within the basic intention of Islam, which is the creation of a just society, the human nature is taken into consideration and is put in the frames of socially acceptable behavior. Therefore, the attitude of the Islamic orthodoxy is permissive towards human sexuality as long as this sexuality is practiced within the framework of socially acceptable behavior. The framework is heterosexuality in marriage. Dichotomy between private and public is very emphasized in Islam. The private sphere is represented in family and home and it is an invulnerable space. According to the traditional Islamic in-

\*\* And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four; but if you fear that you will not do justice (between them), then (marry) only one or what your right hands possess; this is more proper, that you may not deviate from the right course.

The Holy Qur'an. Translated by M.H. Shakir. Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc. 1983). 4.3.

terpretation, a woman is the biggest treasure of a man; she is the ruler of the private space. Therefore, her rarely goes to the public sphere and when she does she is protected. The main purpose of the veil and other clothes is to protect her innocence and to prevent lust of observers in the public space. In the various local forms, such a pattern was dominant until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Modern Society and a Muslim Woman

Coole<sup>2</sup> traces the roots of feminism in a big transformation of social, economic and family relations that started in Great Britain in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and in the culture of individuality and self-reflexion that are related to it. It was the foundation on which the women started to identify themselves as the unjustly deprived category. Feminism entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century as women's movement equipped with feminist ideology. Despite numerous changes that the 20<sup>th</sup> century was going to bring to the women's policy, identity and aspirations the primary goal of feminism was and still is to abolish the discrimination or exclusion based on sex.

Therefore, the feminist perspective approaches to the analysis of a Muslim woman's social role by looking for the cause and manifestations of her submission to a man. Muslim women are subject to double discrimination. As women they are discriminated against in a Muslim society and as Muslim women they are discriminated against in an immigrant society.

However, along side feminism, Islamism as social movement is considered to be the most important movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Is it possible that such an important social movement really insists on sexual discrimination? It is quite the opposite. The women issue is among the issues where Islamism brakes away from Muslim traditionalism.

Islamism is seen as the social agency of modernization in the Muslim societies. Its role is to transmit the idea of modernism to the Muslim masses and to modernize them in a way understandable to them. For this purpose ideologists of Islamism have articulated the idea of modernism using the language understandable to the Muslim masses. Women have the crucial role in the materialization of the ideologists' ideas.

There are over a billion Muslims in the world. They are all over the globe and almost in all societies. Half of that number are women. Over half a billion women. It is impossible to forcefully unify such a big amount of people and make them act only according to one pattern unanimously accepting one social identity with no differences. Islam is one but there are billion Muslims and just as much ways of thinking and practicing of Islamic religion. They all stick to the same pattern but their interpretation and practice are individual.

Islamism offers a modern, unified interpretation of the pattern. The interpretation is adjusted to the modern social conditions. The activism of the Islamic women is also visible. Their public appearances occur worldwide:

from demonstrations of armed and veiled women in Iran to demonstrations of Muslim women in European and American cities that happen for various reasons. Islamists have created an elite group of women intellectuals who write and whose texts are published.

Islamic woman enters politics too although she is not allowed to perform certain functions like being a judge or president of state. The core of Islamic activism is not returning women home but rather separation of sexes in the public. This is why Islamists design special rooms for women in mosques and other public places.

As a result, Roy<sup>3</sup> explains how this new dress code of Muslim women (veil, coat, gloves) enables women to fulfill two mutually opposing goals. Women go out of isolation while at the same time keep their feeling of modesty by wearing the veil. Roy therefore concludes that *hijab* is not a modern adaptation of a traditional veil. It rather signifies a new place for a woman in the social order where the Western model renounces all of the traditional values. This is how a Muslim woman accepts Islamic identity by wearing the veil and at the same time keeps her essence by participating in the modern world.

What kind of an identity is that? Castells<sup>4</sup> classifies identity types in the following way:

- Identity of legitimacy – it was introduced by dominant social institutions in order to expand and rationalize their domination towards a society's protagonists:
- Identity of resistance – it is created by subjects that in positions/conditions in which they feel degraded or stigmatized by the logic of domination:
- Projective identity – appears when social agencies, on a basis of whatever cultural material available, build a new identity, which redefines their position in a society and by doing so look for a transformation of overall social structure.

Islamism is considered to be the identity of resistance. Its public manifestations since the 1970s are oriented towards resistance to domination. The first identity manifestation of the Muslim women in the EU, *the Veil Affair*, happened in the fall 1989 in France. Many manifestations of this kind soon followed. Kepel<sup>5</sup> believes that *Union des organisations islamiques de France* (UOIF) had leading role in the protest. Through its public action the organization wanted to assure its position of the mediator between the Islamic community and the authority.

In return for concessions, this organization offered the authorities a control over potentially unstable youth and a fight against drugs, crime and violence. Such a reasoning of the community made Islam the part of internal and no longer of foreign policy.

The controversy about the veil has been presented to the democratic public in France as the issue of freedom of belief and expression. The media had special emphasis on the young Muslim women who insisted on their desire to obtain modern education while wearing the veil as a protection of values of their religion from the external contamination. For them the republican model was a fail-



ure of promise of integration of an individual. Kepel emphasizes that the children of the immigrants, although entirely accustomed through education and assimilated into the French society but pressured by crime and unemployment, have expressed solidarity on the Islamic bases with the community as an alternative to the crime and unemployment. In that respect, wearing the veil represents the symbolic message of a different public identity – the religious one.

It is common to believe that identity is developed in relation to nation, religion, sex, language, socioeconomic position and life style. During the identity construction it is possible that one constitutive element (nation in the case of secular nationalism) excludes public religious identity. According to this view, Ismail<sup>6</sup> claims that secular national identity cannot be in accord with public religious identity. Namely, the public space does not tolerate symbols of religious identity. In this case the veil in public does not carry a religious message but represents a public appeal for recognition of the right to equality of diversity.

This appeal is the base of the modern Islamic identity. Islamism is a modern political movement whose aim is to win the power and shape the society according to the Islamic ideal – creation of unified Muslim modern identity. Islamism can be seen as an answer to modernism. As such, it is often called Islamic fundamentalism. It is a modern shaped identity and this is what makes it different although to a non-Muslim it often seems like a public expression of traditional identity.

It is a group identity. According to the definition of Deschamps and Devos<sup>7</sup> a group identity is observed through the fact that an individual sees himself as equal to others that are of the same origin (we), but it also relates to the difference, uniqueness that we experience in our relations with members of other groups or categories (they).

The stereotype in interpretation of the woman's social status implies an oppressed person with no freedom of choice and ability to change her status. However, there is a difference between the stereotype and the real situation on the ground. The author's experience with Muslim families in Croatia and Bosnia testifies how women, not men, are in many cases real core of the family: not only that they care for children and household but they also run business affairs and set the lead for the whole family.

Women's detention in the private sphere in Muslim societies is relative. Namely, this stereotype exists in the West. It is the result of woman's absence from public life. It is visible in societies like Afghanistan in time of Soviet occupation. It is possible to see young five-years-old girls but after that age they disappear. Journalist Robert Kaplan<sup>8</sup> notices how in Afghanistan there are no women.

In the company of men in the Afghan society it is not even polite to mention women. However, Afghanistan is definitely not the pattern of Islamic society according to which all the societies where Muslims live should be compared, especially the European societies.

The trend of wearing the veil (*hijab*) is used by many annalists as an example of the growing Islamic enthusiasm. Is it really so? Judith Miller<sup>9</sup> explains how many women that she came across while traveling in Muslim countries liked that style and not necessarily for political reasons. Some women told her that they cannot afford themselves a weekly visit to hairdresser or fancy make-up as some Arab middle-class women take for granted.

In Kasba, Algerian town, families sleep in shifts and women share the bathroom not only with male members of their family but with male neighbors and even strangers. In these situations the veil serves as psychological and physical protection. In overcrowded and uncomfortable Middle Eastern cities, full of young, frustrated men that came in search for job, the veil creates psychological and physical border, which no sexually active young man dares to desecrate. The veil (*hijab*) is sending a message: *I am a religious woman. Leave me alone.*

This example confirms how the veil represents a public statement. Woman that wears it manifests her identity. Giving the fact that she does that in public, she expresses her political attitude as well. There must be a distinction between wearing the veil in overwhelmingly Muslim society and in society where Muslims are minority although in both cases the veil signifies public expression of belonging to Islam and as such it carries a symbolic message.

It is believed here, according to the data and situation's development that Muslim women, by insisting on their distinctiveness, want to be accepted as such and as equal citizens of the society in which they live. They do not want to revive the traditional identity as opposed to the secular society in which they live but rather to set their modernly articulated Muslim identity as equal to other modern identities that they meet every day in the societies they live in.

Rise of consciousness about Muslim women's identity that they gained throughout the process of cultural adjustment, shows how they acquired enough self-consciousness that enables them to expose their private identity in public, asking for its equality. Sometimes the wearing of veil is wrongly interpreted. Namely, non-Muslim authors, looking at the issue from their perspective, try to impose their attitude as the correct one. Therefore, the modern identity of Muslim women, which includes the wearing of the veil, is primarily the identity of resistance to the values than individuals find foreign to them and as such imposed on them.

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## MARAMA (HIDŽAB) KAO JAVNI SIMBOL MODERNOG IDENTITETA MUSLIMANKE

### SAŽETAK

U članku autor interpretira društvenu ulogu muslimanke u postmodernom društvu kroz javni simbol identiteta – maramu. Teza rada je da manifestiranje islamske pripadnosti kod muslimanki pokrivanjem maramom i nošenjem odgovarajuće odjeće (u slučaju muškaraca nošenjem brade i odgovarajuće odjeće) predstavlja iskaz novog, islamistički oblikovanog identiteta. Riječ je o postmodernom identitetu utemeljenom u suvremenosti, a ne o fundamentalističkoj reakciji na modernost. Marami, kao javnom simbolu muslimanskog identiteta, promatrači često pridaju značenje drukčije od značenja koje joj pridaje osoba koja je nosi. Stoga namjeravamo razmotriti elemente zasebnog, postmodernog identiteta koji marama muslimanke, kao javni simbol, predstavlja.